

Reading between the lines in French

French 4 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: To analyze a French text, skim the title, find the main idea (l'idée principale), name the tone (le ton) and the author's purpose (informer, raconter, décrire, convaincre), guess unknown words from context, then summarize in your own words in about a quarter of the original length.

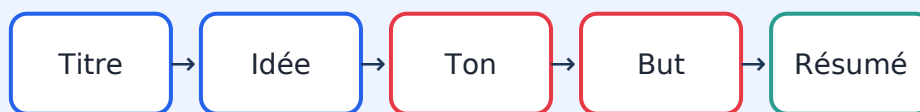
Level: French 4 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Mid) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Mid, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational, WL 4.1 Language Comparisons

How do you analyze a French text step by step?

Read three times. First skim the title, the layout and the first line to guess the genre. Then read for the main idea. Finally reread with a pencil to find tone, purpose and unfamiliar words. Try the method on this short blog post:

Sample text

Je ne comprends pas pourquoi on jette encore autant de vêtements. Dans mon quartier de Lausanne, la boutique solidaire a ouvert cet automne : en trois mois, elle a déjà donné une seconde vie à plus de deux mille pulls et manteaux. Si chacun apportait ses vieux vêtements, nous ferions un geste simple pour la planète.



Cinq étapes pour lire un texte

The five steps of a text analysis.

Question	French label	Answer for the sample
Main idea	l'idée principale	Donating used clothes is a simple, useful act.
Tone	le ton	engagé, optimiste (committed, hopeful)
Purpose	le but de l'auteur	convaincre (persuade)
Evidence	les indices	Si chacun apportait... invites action.

Tones and purposes

Tones: ironique (says the opposite), nostalgique (misses the past), humoristique, critique, enthousiaste, neutre, inquiet. Purposes: informer, raconter, décrire, convaincre, divertir, dénoncer.

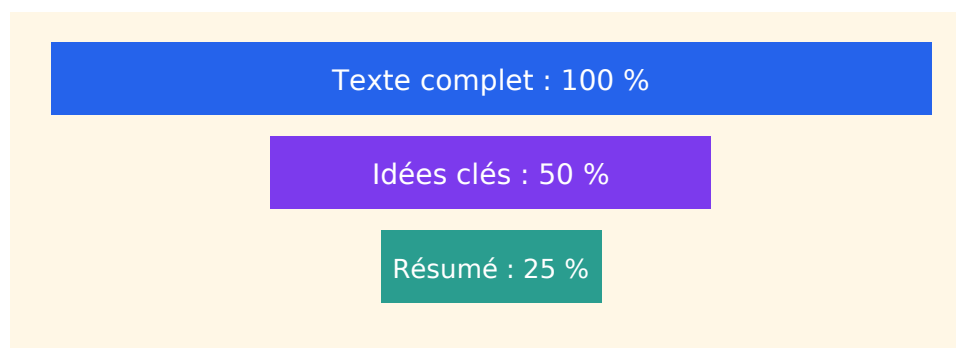
How do you guess a word you do not know?

- Use the family: patinoire sits near patins, so it is a place for skating.
- Cut the word: relire = re- (again) + lire; lentement = lent + -ment (-ly).
- Read the sentence around it: contrast words such as mais signal an opposite idea.

False friends

actuellement means currently, not actually; déçu means disappointed, not deceived; assister à means to attend; sensible means sensitive.

How do you write a summary?



A summary keeps about a quarter of the text.

Find one idea per paragraph, delete examples, rewrite with your own words in the present tense and start with Le texte explique que.... Model: La narratrice encourage ses lecteurs à donner leurs vieux vêtements, car une boutique de Lausanne en a déjà recyclé plus de deux mille en trois mois.

Culture note

In French schools, the explication de texte is a close reading of a short passage. Students also meet this skill in the written and oral bac de français taken in première.

Zoé's tip

Underline one verb and one adjective in every paragraph. They usually carry the tone, and they give you the evidence to quote.

Key points to remember

- The main idea answers: what is the whole text mostly about?
- Tone is the author's attitude: ironique, nostalgique, enthousiaste, critique, neutre.
- Purpose verbs: informer, raconter, décrire, convaincre, divertir, dénoncer.
- Context clues: word family, prefix or suffix, neighboring words, cognates (watch false friends).
- A good summary is reformulated, objective and about 25 % of the original.

Reading Between the Lines in French: frequently asked questions**How do I find the main idea of a French text?**

Read the title and first sentence, then ask what the whole text is mostly about. Ignore examples and numbers. State the idea in one sentence beginning with Le texte explique que... or L'auteur montre que....

How do I recognize the tone of a text?

Look at adjectives, verbs, punctuation and contrasts. Exclamation marks and words like génial suggest an enthusiastic tone. Praise that sounds exaggerated or contradicts the facts often signals irony.

What are the main purposes an author can have?

The most common are informer (give facts), raconter (tell a story), décrire (paint a scene), convaincre (persuade), divertir (entertain) and dénoncer (criticize a problem). A text can combine two purposes.

How can I understand unknown words without a dictionary?

Use the word family, prefixes and suffixes, English cognates and the sentence around the word. Check for false friends such as actuellement (currently) and assister à (to attend).

How long should a summary be?

Aim for roughly one quarter of the original. Keep only the main ideas, rewrite them in your own words, use connectors such as d'abord, ensuite and enfin, and leave out your personal opinion.